

## ◀ SKELETON DANCE

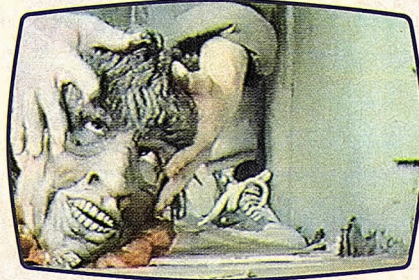
From Walt Disney's *Silly Symphonies* to Abbott and Costello to the Three Stooges, the dancing skeleton is a staple of the cinema. With the animation feature of your camcorder, you can make an inexpensive cardboard skeleton emulate this silver-screen icon. Because a five-and-dime cardboard skeleton has movable arms and legs, you can arrange them at right angles at every animation interval to create a hysterical, herky-jerky effect. Just mount or hang the skeleton against a flat surface (preferably with a black backdrop) and go. For more amusement, try the effect with three of them, and create a Moulin Rouge chorus line of dancing skeletons, with their right and left legs kicking in unison.

## GETTING A HEAD ▶

For our last effect, we chose one created by a couple of our readers, horror-maven brothers Blake and Brett Cousins, for our Great **VIDEO REVIEW** Shootoff. In their innovative and gory entry *Slaughter Day III*, they gave us this *Re-Animator*-inspired moment.

The killer, having been hacked to pieces by the heroes, literally puts himself back together, twisting on his head last. As you might imagine, it takes at least two people to pull off this effect, but the wonder of it is more in the editing than the shooting.

First, one of the actors scrunched himself up in an oversized jacket, head concealed within. For the gory area around the neck, the brothers used couch stuffing soaked in fake blood (cotton and food dye will do). Another actor put on the dummy mask and poked his head through a hole in the floor of the abandoned house where they shot the scene. The camcorder cut away just as the first actor's hands gripped the head and started lifting. (You can get around the floorboard trick by shooting a long shot of the headless, writhing body with the mask on the floor beside it—stuffed and propped to give the appearance of reality.) By keeping the long shots brief and alternating them with quick close-up shots of the mask with a real head in it (eyes always rolling, to keep the audience convinced) the Cousins brothers created a scary and funny sequence—and it cost them only about four dollars in supplies! □





## CRITIC'S CHOICE

# HORROR

By Richard Schickel

**Presenting  
the Ninth in a  
10th Anniversary  
Series—America's  
Leading Critics  
on the World's  
Greatest Movies**

**T**o tell you the truth, I don't scare easy. (Not at the movies, anyway; life is a different matter.) Nor do I readily suspend disbelief in the heavy fantastic (the light fantastic—romance comedy, musicals, improbable adventure yarns—is also a different matter). Put it this way: Ghosts, mutants, intergalactic aliens and Beelzebub in his many manifestations exist for me only as metaphors for certain unpleasant possibilities of this world, not as realistic representations of alternative worlds. This means that many classic horror movies leave me unmoved. Or, at best, moved to contemptuous snorts and snickers.

On the other hand, I am easily disgusted. This means that though I have attended most of the more recent, and in some quarters highly esteemed, horror pictures, I can't honestly claim to have seen them in their entirety. I automatically turn away when blood and entrails are splattered all too lavishly across the screen, or when the hero's transformation into a monster is all too vividly presented, thanks to the latest in make-up and special effects.

Let me illustrate those generalities specifically: The original 1958 version of *The Fly* is not one of my favorites (too silly), and neither is David Cronenberg's 1986 remake (too nauseating).

And now let me renege on those generalities—at least partially. For I have to admit that many of my most intense movie memories are of horror movies. I am obliged to observe as well that it is a particularly hardy genre, one that (unlike westerns, musicals and

screwball comedies) has flourished in every movie era. Finally, and most importantly, I have to insist that some of the movies' most arresting and sophisticated imagery has been generated by the simple desire to scare the pants off us. Or (ahem) to put us in touch with our primal fears—which amounts to the same thing.

All of which makes me (at least in my own opinion) the perfect person for an overview of the 10 best scare sagas available on video. I am not a horror cultist revering and proselytizing for everything and anything that feeds his passion. Nor am I one of those mainstream reviewers who likes to pat horror on its head and dismiss it with a supercilious joke. Hey, it didn't get to me—not to august, judicious me. In other words, I think I'm capable of maintaining the correct stance toward this genre—that blend of skepticism and sympathy out of which a sensible appreciation of any expressive form arises.

What follows might be termed a selection of horror movies for people who don't like horror movies—or, more properly, for people who don't like to admit that they like horror movies. Its bias is toward pictures that marked turning points in the history of the genre. It also favors movies that use the bizarre and the supernatural not as ends in themselves, but as metaphors that allow us to confront some of our most basic anxieties. Finally, the selection prizes a self-satirizing spirit—not so campy that our terror is fatally dulled, but humorously aware of the movies' manipulations and our own eager complicity in the effort to scare away our quotidian cares and woes.





**KING KONG** (1933). Poor beast, tormented and lovesick. We have long since forgiven him his sins, taken him to heart. Almost six decades of familiarity have domesticated his charms. We forget now what a big, scary guy he was in the eyes of his first audiences. And we forget, too, what an original creation *King Kong* was. Despite the screen credits he shared with co-producer and co-director Ernest Schoedsack and a raft of writers, the sole creator of Kong seems to have been Merian C. Cooper, explorer and documentarian turned studio executive. The great ape is, in fact, the only transcendent horror figure whose origins cannot be traced to literary

model or mythic archetype. He was *sui generis*. But not for long, since he is the obvious prototype for all the overgrown monsters of subsequent movie history. Similarly, the stop-motion miniature photography by which special-effects genius Willis O'Brien animated Kong initiated the modern age of that craft. But the best thing about *King Kong* is its storytelling—it has the surface simplicity and the complex resonances of myths less consciously created, a rich blend of innocence and eroticism, adventure and pathos, terror and comedy. You keep discovering fresh felicities no matter how often you see it. (Turner tape; Criterion Collection/Voyager CAV disc)

**THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN** (1935). In recent years we've grown used to movies that self-consciously satirize their own generic tradition. But this first of the many sequels to (and rip-offs of) *Frankenstein* (1931) remains the most delightfully knowing in the way it simultaneously played to two audiences: satisfying the horror fan's conventional expectations while at the same time amusing sophisticates by slyly satirizing those conventions. The setting is horror's classic milieu—Mittel Europa, all crags, castles and credulous peasants. Of course, we also have the brilliant outlaw scientist determined to challenge natural law and order, with literally monstrous results when his experiments go awry. The conceit is that the monster of the original movie (and Mary Shelley's timeless novel) has not been killed after all and that he might be civilized by marriage. Easy enough for the Doctor to create a mate (Elsa Lanchester, who—lovely stroke, this—also plays author Shelley in the movie's framing device), but devilishly difficult for boy to get girl. She just hates him—and their courtship has about it, of all things, something of the spirit of screwball comedy. But there is more: the subtle exaggerations in director James Whale's design and staging throughout and, best of all, Ernest Thesiger's portrayal of Pretorius, another scientist, com-



**Clockwise from upper left: Valerie Hobson in *Bride of Frankenstein*; rope-danglers Fay Wray and Bruce Cabot in the original *King Kong*; Simone Simon and Ann Carter in *The Curse of the Cat People*; Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh in *Psycho*; Colin Clive as monster-maker Frankenstein.**

ically casual in his acceptance of his own and the world's evil. The moment when the monster comes upon him—in a crypt, naturally—and Pretorius blandly offers him a cigar ("They are my one weakness") may be the most gloriously goofy moment in all of Horror. (MCA/Universal tape and CAV disc)

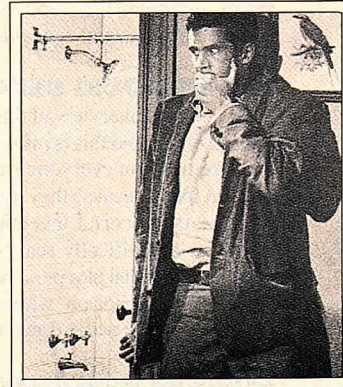


## THE CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE

(1944). A lonely, troubled, highly imaginative little girl is lost, wandering down a country road as the wind rises spookily. She has lately been told the tale of the Headless Horseman and now, sure enough, she hears the sound of hoofbeats growing louder, louder, louder. Terrified, she turns and confronts... an old flivver

grinding and bouncing along, the sound of its engine mimicking in her mind the legendary rider and his steed. That's the first time I was ever scared witless by a movie, but it is not merely nostalgia for the lost frights of childhood that causes this movie's inclusion here. Critic James Agee found this movie "full of the poetry and danger of childhood," and so it is. Moreover, it is typical of producer Val Lewton's unit at RKO in the '40s. He believed an unseen menace is much more frightening than one literally realized. A shadow on the wall, a sound outside the window, a sting in the music—these were the economical Lewton's trademarks. He didn't want to make a sequel to his greatest success, *Cat People* (which belongs on this list, too), but the studio insisted, so the villainess of that picture (Simone Simon) was reincarnated as a ghost who could also be understood as the child's imaginary friend, and Lewton and co-director Robert Wise (making his debut) somehow made this crude imposition plausible and instructive. (Turner tape; Image CLV disc)

**PSYCHO** (1960). No need to dwell on it, is there? It's your basic haunted-house story, brilliantly reanimated by the most daring reversal of audience expectations in the history of the cinema—killing off the star less than halfway through the picture. It's all wonderfully sustained by the creepy authority of Anthony Perkins' performance (which is still underrated) and the assured elegance of Alfred Hitchcock's direction. Historically, *Psycho* vividly confirmed our growing sense that horror had definitely emigrated from distant Europe and was now relocated in our own backyards. More important, it placed the homicidal psychopath—until then, only an occasional



menace in movies—at the center of the horror genre, a position from which he has not yet been dislodged. And he's unlikely ever to be, since almost every day's newspaper reminds us that the type is real, legion, all around us. (MCA/Universal tape and CLV disc)



**THE BIRDS** (1963). Horror, no matter what metaphorical clothes it wears, must be defined most basically as nature in disarray—for some reason behaving unexpectedly, unpredictably, and so upsetting our faith in the orderliness of our days. To the creators of horror (and sci-fi) the atomic bomb has been, since 1945, the great dislocator, symbol of our worst fear: The mutants it produces in our fictions symbolize our sense that nothing is immutable these days. The genius of *The Birds* is that it offers no easy atomic explanation



for the sudden bad behavior of our fine-feathered friends. One day they all get together in what amounts to a hostile mob and set about changing the pecking order in at least one corner of the world. It is their motiveless malignity—and the cool patience with which Hitchcock builds terror, starting with isolated oddities of avian behavior, ending in fully orchestrated mass assault—that makes this a classic of its kind. (MCA/Universal tape and CLV disc)

**ROSEMARY'S BABY** (1968). A coven of witches living on Central Park West? Why not—anything's possible in New York. But that implausibility is balanced by the distinct and darkly witty possibility that an out-of-work actor (a marvelously saturnine John Cassavetes) might sell his unborn child's soul for a chance at a good role. But the real originality of *Rosemary's Baby* lies in the way it reminds us of the prenatal anxiety every would-be parent experiences—the fear that our child may be born damaged or “different.” Precisely because that fear is universal, the power of Roman Polanski's movie to terrify remains undiminished, and perhaps undimin- ishable. (Paramount tape and CLV disc)

**THE MISSOURI BREAKS** (1976). Every critical overview of this kind needs a weirdo entry, and this is mine. As a western it seems to be on everyone's all-time worst list, but that's because they don't see Arthur Penn's off-the-coral invention for what it really is: a terrifically scary-funny horror show. The official plot pits a band of rustlers (led by Jack Nicholson, who slowly realizes he would like to settle down to respectable



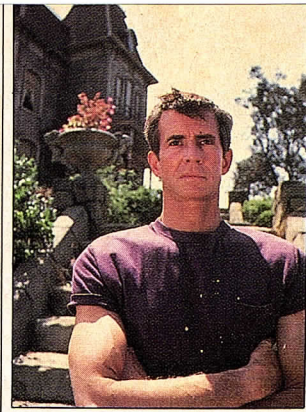
**Clockwise from upper left: Rod Taylor, Tippi Hedren, Jessica Tandy in Hitchcock's *The Birds*; Marlon Brando in *The Missouri Breaks*; and Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby*.**

## ANTHONY PERKINS' PICKS

The man in the Oedipal undies, Anthony Perkins was the archetype of the sweet young slasher in Hitchcock's original *Psycho*. In addition to the *Psychos II* through *IV*, Perkins has starred in such horror titles as *Edge of Sanity* and *Destroyer*. None of these happen to be Perkins' personal favorites in the horror genre, which are:

**CAT PEOPLE** (1942). “[It] has a sensuality that makes it all the more tension-provoking—and it's a movie that ought to be seen again and again. It's an incredibly provocative picture.” (Turner tape; Image CLV disc)

**THE BODY SNATCHER** (1945). “From the same producer as *Cat People*, Val Lewton. It comes at you from someplace you've never been. It hit me where I'm most vulnerable, with its theme of love of death. That's what makes it so scary.” (Turner tape; Image CLV disc)



**THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME** (1932). “This movie's been made about 27 times, the last time as *Slave Girls from Beyond Infinity*. The original has the same cast as *King Kong*, because they shot it at the same time.” (Video Yesteryear, KVC tapes)

**DR. X** (1932). “A movie about synthetic flesh. You never suspect the killer. Everybody's being choked, and you don't know why until you realize the guy with one arm has been cooking up a batch of synthetic flesh to create a little handle. Great fun.” (MGM/UA tape)

ranching) against a “regulator” (Marlon Brando), hired by the local cattle baron to clear them out. But this is a between-the-lines movie. Working off a half-finished script,

Brando, encouraged by Penn, started improvising his character. His clothes range from white fringed-buckskin preacher's grab to a

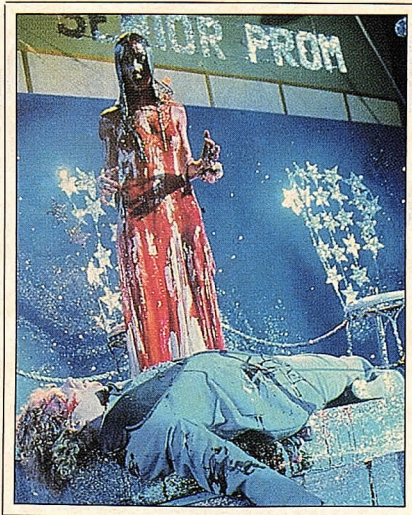


granny dress, his accents from Irish to English to straight *American*. It's a blackly funny creation, but eventually he turns the prairie into a gigantic haunted house, popping out of its shadows to kill off Nicholson's band in a variety of grotesquely imaginative ways. It is precisely the lack of core in his character, his consequent unpredictability, that makes him such a frightening menace. There's no attempt to explain his homicidal mania; he is ever and always a sport of (human) nature. And *The Missouri Breaks* remains one of the most radical—and thoroughly intriguing attempts—to cross, and mix, generic lines. (CBS/Fox tape, recently withdrawn)

**CARRIE** (1976). This is the movie that initiated the new, or Stephen King, era in horror. It also con-



tains what may be the most famous closing image in movie history (its dead heroine's hand shooting up out of the grave). But its power, like so many of King's works, derives from the brilliant connection it makes with commonplace afflictions. The hormonal firestorms of adolescence are something we've all experienced. So is the teenage fear of being (or suddenly becoming) unpopular

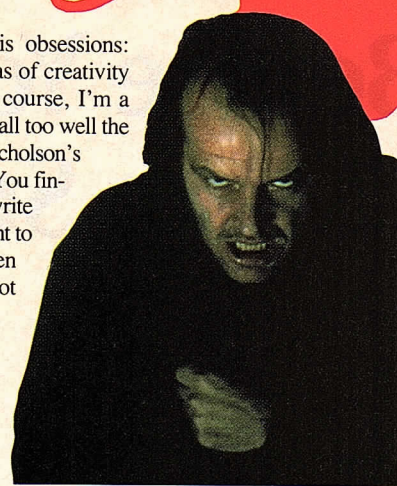


—as well as parents who refuse to understand what we're going through. How easy, then, to identify with poor Carrie (Sissy Spacek), suffering all of those troubles. How delightful to join in her discovery that she has the power—psychokinesis—to revenge herself on all her tormentors. What wouldn't we have given at a certain time in our lives, to be endowed (along with the several inconveniences of the transition to adulthood) with this enormous convenience. Brian De Palma, always a master of technique, orchestrates a particularly glorious variety of special effects in telling her story. But Carrie always remains a sympathetic and very believable figure. One gets the feeling that he once knew, and always remembered, what it was like to be a high-school nerd. (MGM/UA tape)

**THE SHINING** (1980). King and his fans have never liked the way Stanley Kubrick treated the original novel—slow and loose. But I'm a Kubrick fan and I'm fascinated by the way he warped the story to ac-

**Clockwise from upper left: Sissy Spacek in Carrie; Jack Nicholson in The Shining; Dee Wallace in Cujo.**

commodate some of his obsessions: most notably the enigmas of creativity and mortality. Also, of course, I'm a writer, and I understand all too well the issue confronting Jack Nicholson's character in this movie: You finally get enough time to write something that's important to you, then you block when your best excuse for not getting on with it is taken away. This says nothing about the characteristic impeccability of Kubrick's moviemaking, his unique ability to tell a complex story and reveal complex psychologies through purely visual means. (Warner tape)

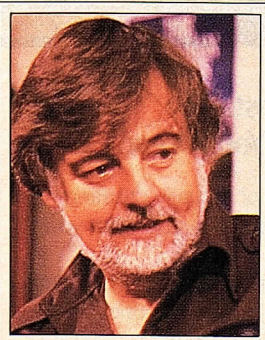


**CUJO** (1983). "He just wants to go get ya, and I relate to that." So



says Stephen King on the generally underappreciated talents of Lewis Teague, director of *Cujo* and also of the excellent *Alligator* (1980). Both transform commonplace, almost clichéd, imaginings into solid entertainments. The latter takes off from the pervasive urban myth holding that the sewers are full of huge alligators grown from the babies flushed thither by Florida vacationers who had grown tired of their living souvenirs. It's a smart, funny little movie. *Cujo* takes up our dread of the junkyard dog—mean, crazy and possibly diseased. And there's nothing funny about it at all, when a mother and son, innocently seeking auto repair, get trapped for several hot summer days in their claustrophobic Pinto while the title canine, a huge St. Bernard, rabidly hurls himself at the car and thwarts their very effort to escape. He is not the hound of hell, but he comes as close to that stature as anything this world offers. And the low-budget *Cujo* is about as tense, tough and thoroughly believable as anything the movies have recently offered. With it, the gap that once existed between the exotic venues in which most horror movies used to take place—safely distanced, obviously imaginary places—and reality, as most of us experience it, is finally, firmly closed. This could happen here. To you. To me. (Warner tape and CLV disc) □

Regular VR reviewer Richard Schickel is a Time film critic, the author of *Schickel on Film and The Men Who Made the Movies*, among other books, and is writer-producer of TV documentaries on Myrna Loy, Gary Cooper and Vincente Minnelli.



The director who really brings death to life—or is it life to death?—George Romero created the original no-budget horror classic, *Night of the Living Dead*. In addition to its follow-ups, *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead*, Romero has contributed *Season of the Witch*, *Creepshow* and *Monkey Shines* to the horror genre. His own favorites are:

**TARGETS** (1968). "Peter Bogdanovich's first movie has

## GEORGE ROMERO'S PICKS

a nice little historical corollary. The movie pinpointed the age at which gothic castles became passe in horror movies. And there's that great moment when the sniper can't decide whether to shoot Boris Karloff on the drive-in movie screen or the live Karloff in front of him." (Paramount tape)

**HENRY: PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER** (1989). "A remarkable movie by a guy named John McNaughton, made for under \$200,000, and shot on 16mm. Besides being an inspiration to independent moviemakers for what you can do with no budget, it's also about a modern horror, much more real than *Frankenstein* or other monsters." (Forthcoming on MPI tape)

**THE SERPENT AND THE RAINBOW** (1988). "All of Wes Craven's movies are very

personal and usually about destruction from within the nuclear family. This is his best, perhaps. It's the *Out of Africa* of horror movies—an epic with an intimate core." (MCA/Universal tape and CLV disc)

**NEAR DARK** (1987). "It works as a modification of the vampire movie, combining it with drug addiction and modernizing it with a western motif. It's really clever. Kathryn Bigelow is a really stylish director, pacing the picture very slowly even though you think it goes so fast." (HBO tape and HBO/Image CLV disc)

**EVIL DEAD I and II** (1983, 1987). "These are tremendous little black comedies, almost visionary in their excesses. Each is set in a house in the woods, and writer-director Sam Raimi just rips it apart." (HBO, Vestron tapes; Image CLV disc)



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